EDITORIAL

Supporting the Ebola Nurses

The Ebola virus has infected thousands of people in West Africa. Nearly 5,000 have died in the outbreak and more are dying daily. As of August 2014, in Kenema, Sierra Leone, Nurse Josephine Finda Sellu has lost 15 of her nurses. These are nurses whose names we do not know (Nossiter & Solomon, 2014). By contrast, two American nurses have been well identified in the American media; Nina Pham, RN, and Amber Vinson, RN, contracted Ebola while caring for a patient with the disease at a hospital in Texas, USA. Another nurse in Spain tested positive for the virus. While nurses are particularly vulnerable, other healthcare workers, including those burying bodies and cleaning up wastes, are also dying. Because these staff members are indeed on the front lines facing eminent dangers each day, it is critical that hospitals and clinics everywhere establish systems and procedures that protect their lives and safety.

In any disaster, history has shown that nurses and other healthcare workers need to feel that they can protect themselves and their families from illness. Nurses from all over the world are taking action to respond to the Ebola epidemic and deserve to feel safe. This has been the case in several instances. Recently, Cuba sent 165 doctors and nurses to Sierra Leone. Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) employs hundreds of international and thousands of locally hired workers to fight the disease. To date, neither group has lost staff to Ebola. Successes in Nigeria and Senegal have also been reported. What can we learn from them? Médecins Sans Frontières’ workers manage waste in particular ways; they spend weeks training their workers in isolation practices, and they have resources to care for thousands of patients. Workers in Nigeria and Senegal strictly imposed quarantine and monitored contacts (The Economist, 2014).

While combatting Ebola demands many interventions, most important is the care provided by competent and skilled nurses, whose names we do not know have skills to care for very complex patients. As former intensive care unit nurses, we credit nurses with the merits of care and compassion, yet we recognize that those qualities only add distinction to their professional skills and expertise that make the job they do not only important but essential. Our nursing colleagues are well aware of the highly complex care that patients with Ebola require. These nurses have to have knowledge of the signs and symptoms of clinical deterioration. They must be vigilant observers for signs of complications over the course of the disease. They also have to know about fluid and electrolyte balance, the intricacies of maintaining accurate intake and output records, and how to care for patients on ventilators and renal dialysis machines. The knowledge they learn during their studies enables them to respond as skilled and educated nurses.

Nurses also have management skills. One newspaper report described Ms. Sellu as resembling “a field marshal in light brown medical scrubs, charging forward… inspecting food for patients, doing a dance for once-infected co-workers who live—‘nurse survivors,’ she called them enthusiastically—and barking orders from the head-to-toe suit that protects her from her patients” (Nossiter & Solomon, 2014, p. 1).

We applaud these nurses. We want others like them to care for us, not only because they are kind and compassionate but also because they are highly knowledgeable and competent. Around the world, the public should recognize the importance of nursing and trust that compassionate and professionally trained nurses will be there to take care of them should the need ever arise. These nurses need the resources, equipment, skills, and knowledge to respond effectively to this disaster.

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REFERENCES
